

INTERVIEW WITH SUPER INFRAMAN DIRECTOR HUA SHAN

The following is an excerpt from Linn Haynes' career spanning interview with director Hua Shan. Linn would like to thank the director for his honesty and thoroughness during the interview. He would also like to thank the director's son Chin Wah for translating the questions and answers to make this interview possible.

LH: What were the circumstances of you becoming a cinematographer?

HS: I was born in Shanghai in 1942. After I graduated from high school in the summer of 1960, I enrolled into the Shanghai film Academy for a degree in cinematography. I studied cinematography, because during that time people with a cultural background, especially movie makers, were highly respected in China. I was very lucky to be able to enroll in this course, because tens of thousands of people were trying to apply but there was only 20 or so places available per year. You could say I was lucky. Unfortunately, I didn't complete the course. After studying for two years, I went to Hong Kong in the summer of 1962 to visit my family and stayed there.

LH: Who were your influences and your favorite films at this time?

HS: At that time, my favorite movies were Italian New-Realism movies, especially "The Bicycle Thief". My favourite scene is when the father and son were looking for their lost bicycle but could not find it; then it started raining and they look for shelter and feeling helpless. The director placed a group of missionaries to wander past them. Though the missionaries have no specific meaning to the plot, it gives the viewer a good feeling.

LH: According to the Hong Kong Film Archives, you joined the Shaw Brothers in 1962. How did you come to get a job there?

HS: I actually joined Shaw Brothers at 1963, not 62. When I arrived at Hong Kong, I really wanted to work in a film studio, but it was very difficult to get into this circle, especially as a foreigner. Then in the end of 1963, Shaw Brothers was recruiting young actors at their acting school. So I signed up. It was Mr. Ho Kwun Cheung (co-founder of Golden Harvest Studio) who interviewed me. After looking at my resume, Mr. Ho said "we need professional cinematographers, I can arrange for you to be an assistant of one of our best cinematographers, are you willing to learn under him?" Obviously I agreed, and that was how I started working at Shaw Brothers.

LH: And so you became assistant to cinematographer Nishimoto Tadashi.

HS: My first job was technically "second assistant to the cinematographer". I was the apprentice of Mr. Tadashi. Mr. Tadashi is very honest, kind, sincere, and very professional at his work. He contributed a lot to the Hong Kong movie industry; especially advancing the techniques of cinematography. Mr. Tadashi was the one who convinced the Shaw Brothers to change from black and white movies to widescreen color films.

LH: What films did you work on with him during this time?

HS: As an assistant, I had the importunately to work with many film directors and other cinematographers. I worked on films such as King Hu's Come Drink with Me (1968) and productions directed by Japanese film directors at Shaws Bros.

LH: As a cinematographer, what were your jobs on the set?

HS: As a cinematographer on set, my duty was to express the director's vision through the lens. I would shoot scenes without showing the wires and harness used for action. When we watched the footage before editing, I would be very stressed, sweating, and very nervous. Other more specific jobs include holding the camera, lighting, discussing with the director how the scene should be shot, positioning of the camera and actors; communicating with the fight director, etc. Also on set, makeup artists, prop, lighting, stunt coordinators, and other technicians would come to the cinematographer to seek advice.

LH: In 1971, you left Shaw Brothers and went to Taiwan to start work as a director. What was the reason for you leaving the Shaw Brothers?

HS: Around 1970, Shaws Brothers had personnel shake-ups, Raymond Chow (production manager) and Ho Kung Cheung (PR manager) left Shaws Bros. to set up Golden Harvest. Wang Yu has also left Shaws Bros to go to Taiwan. At that time, "Ming Sing Film Company" was going to shoot Deaf and Mute Heroine (1971) and offered me a job to be their cinematographer. Their salary was three times more than what Shaws Bros. offered! So I left Shaws Bros to become a contracted cinematographer with Ming Sing. During the three years there, I was working in Hong Kong. I did not leave to Taiwan; even during the shooting of Hong Dudou (The Red Lingerie). I only went to Taiwan for a couple of months to shoot some scenery shots.

LH: This was around the same time that a lot of workers left the company.

HS: After 1968, Hong Kong started to enjoy a settled political environment and the society become more prosperous. There were opportunities everywhere. By the beginning of the 70's, many independent film companies began to rise in Hong Kong and were hungry for writers and directors. During that time I worked at "Ming Sing Film Company" in Hong Kong and other independent film companies in Hong Kong as cinematographer. I returned to Shaw Bros. to direct Chinese Inframan in 1974.

LH: This was a Chinese version of the popular Japanese super hero TV shows and movies. My understanding is that Japanese live-action and animated superhero programs were popular on Hong Kong and Taiwanese television at the time.

HS: Correct, Ultraman, Kamen Rider and other Japanese "superhero" TV shows were very popular at this time on Hong Kong TV, especially Kamen Rider and Ultraman. Children loved to watch and imitate their favorite superheroes. Shaw Bros, at the time wanted to film a Kamen Rider type of film for the Hong Kong children. The overseas Chinese markets in Southeast Asia, USA and Hong Kong were big enough to justify the production of such a film. Although I had watched a few episodes of Kamen Rider on TV and was aware of its popularity, I never expected them to ask me to direct Inframan.

LH: Ni Kuang was the screenwriter for the film. What was it like working with Ni Kuang?

HS: Ni Kuang is a very famous writer in Hong Kong. He wrote a lot of scripts for Shaw Bros. I only received his script from the producer. I was not familiar with Ni Kuang. After I received his script, I met him once to discuss some minor details...I can't even remember what we discussed. There was an interesting way Ni Kuang wrote his scripts; he never edited or revised them. The director could do whatever they wanted with the script, even change it completely and he wouldn't care. I think this was because he simply had too many stories to

write and just didn't have the time to make changes.

LH: What was the writing process for a typical Shaw Brothers movie?

HS: There are three types of writing processes for a typical Shaw Bros movie:

A. Shaw Bros will hire a freelance writer to write a script specified by the Shaw's.

B. The director provides his own script.

C. The director provides a storyline. When that is approved by Shaw's, a writer will then help write the script, with the involvements and comments from the director.

Inframan was written with method A. Most of the scripts that got approved by Shaw Bros production team were text scripts and directors were not required to present story boards. Most directors simply worked out the shots during filming; some would even change the script while filming. But Inframan was pretty loyal to the original script.

LH: On this film, you worked with Japanese artist/sculptor Michio Mikami. He was well known in Japan for Ekisu Productions Kamen Rider series. Looking at Mr. Michio Mikami's KAMEN RIDER and KAMEN RIDER V3 shows, it appears that CHINESE INFRAMAN was influenced by them.

HS: Both Inframan and Kamen Rider were designed by the Michio Mikami, therefore it is not surprising that both looked similar. Shaw Bros also preferred Inframan to look like Kamen Rider, therefore we worked towards that goal.

LH: Ekisu Productions were hired to design monsters and the sets, but were they actually built in Hong Kong or in Japan?

HS: Mikami brought two assistants with him to Shaw Brothers Studios to assist the production team in Hong Kong to make all the costumes and set pieces – everything was made in Hong Kong by Shaw Brothers.

LH: According to the Hong Kong press, this was the first Shaw Brothers film to employ storyboarding in its production. Did you do these storyboards?

HS: Storyboarding was used on some of the special effect scenes. The storyboards were drawn by Mikami himself and we filmed those scenes as per his drawings. Otherwise, no storyboards were used. The reports on this have been highly exaggerated.

LH: Your cameraman for this film was your mentor Mr. Tadashi. Was your relationship any different now that you were the director of the film?

HS: Our relationship did not change when I became a film director. Mr. Tadashi was a very respectable figure amongst the studios and I trusted him very much. He was very helpful to me and encouraged me during the making of the film. Because he was such an experienced cinematographer, when shooting some of the special effect scenes, he very accurately calculated the speed of the film and worked out the lights and brightness of the set. This helped us save a lot of time filming and kept our schedule running very smoothly. Considering the fact that no computer aids were available then, Master Tadashi's skills were really amazing.

LH: How was the language barrier handled on set? My understanding is that Michio Mikami was born and raised in Manchuria. I would assume that that made it much easier for you.

HS: There were translators around to assist us when we were filming, therefore there was no language barriers. Mr. Tadashi told me Mr. Mikami was born in Chang Chun, China. His father was working in the Chang Chun Railway then. His childhood was spent in China. Later, Mikami went back to Japan to study. When he graduated from Japan Film Academy, he returned to Chang Chun to work in the Chang Chun Manchuria Studio. He returned to Japan after the War. Mikami could not speak Chinese fluently. But he could read and write Chinese very well, his Chinese calligraphy is very beautiful. When we worked together, we communicated via translator because it was quicker. During dinner or drinking, we would use half Japanese, half Chinese to talk. If we still couldn't understand each other, then we would write in Chinese to each other.

LH: Photos from the set show Inframan on an "Infra Cycle." Who designed and built this motorcycle?

HS: Mikami designed an Infra Cycle for the movie and it looked very good. But once we got it into the studio and started the engine, bits and pieces started falling off the bike! And since they were specially made, it took ages to have them fixed. I'm sorry to say we had to abandon the bike in order not to delay the schedule.

LH: Was permission given to use the Japanese film stock footage of burning buildings from the Japanese film "The Submersion of Japan?"

HS: There are a lot of canned footages from the Shaw Bros editing dept. According to the editor, Shaws bought this footage from overseas. If required, the editor added a bit of this footage scenes to save money and time. In the case of Inframan, there is a fire scene we needed to shoot - we needed a shot of the full view. Originally we were thinking of building a model of the city and then burn it to film the fire scene, but our producer wanted us to save money, so they instructed us to use this canned footage instead.

LH: Danny Lee went on to become one of the stars of Hong Kong Cinema often playing a policeman in films. What are your thoughts of him while working at Shaw Brothers Studios? Did he do his own stunts in the film or was someone else in the suit?

HS: Danny was very young when he did Inframan. He was quick, energetic, serious about his work, and very easygoing. He is a friendly person in general. All the stunt shots without wearing the Inframan suit, he did them himself of course. Stuntmen are used for stunts involving the Inframan suit. The Inframan suit and helmet was very heavy and hot. It is very tiring and inconvenient to fight with the full gear on. Sometimes when stuntman became tired, Danny volunteered to put the suit on and do the stunts himself.

LH: The professor's daughter in the film is seen reading a book titled "The Devil." Since she was so innocent, was this a joke made by yourself or the crew?

HS: It was good you caught that, as I put the book in there for a reason. Sun Tzu said: "to understand the enemy is to understand yourself, enabling you to win a hundred battles" Therefore, the professor should study about the evils of the Devil, as well as research the righteousness of Science. I showed his innocent daughter picking up the book. I hoped that by reading about the devil, his daughter would be safe from the evil around her by

understanding their enemy.

LH: Hong Kong is not known for making science fiction films, why do you feel that is?

HS: Hong Kong is a very commercial city. All studio bosses wish to make a big movie with the minimum budget and time. Sci-Fi movies have high budgets with long schedules, and not many people had special effect production expertise then. So sci-fi movies just were not considered a good investment at the time.

LH: Was Inframan successful for the Shaw Brothers in Hong Kong?

HS: Inframan was a film the Shaw Brothers made specifically for the children of Hong Kong. Unfortunately, as the film opening Inframan in the cinemas, a child imitated his favorite Japanese superhero after watching a TV show. He jumped out of the window of his apartment thinking he could fly and died. The incident shocked the whole society of Hong Kong. This affected the popularity of these shows in Hong Kong, and the box office of the film very badly. The film was a flop locally and the Shaw Brothers never made a sequel.

LH: What do you think of the film itself?

HS: Financially, Inframan was not a very successful movie. But it is Hong Kong's first ever Sci-Fi special effects movie. Inframan is also the only film ever made in Hong Kong with traditional modeling and special effects techniques from Japan. Later films mostly used computer or animation. Inframan is successful in the way it laid a foundation and trained talents in the sci-fi movie style that would be featured later at the Shaw Brothers and other studios. I was satisfied with this movie in that it allowed me to use all the special effects skills I had learned up until that time. And I'm glad to see so long after I made these movies, people are still enjoying my work.